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'From the Sublime to the Ridiculous: Extinction in the work of Marcus Coates', Sarah Wade

**From the Sublime to the Ridiculous: Extinction in the work of Marcus Coates**  
**Sarah Wade**

Marcus Coates is a British contemporary artist whose work has interrogated human–animal relations for over twenty years. His performances have a humorous tenor and often employ an eccentric zoomorphism, in which the artist attempts to 'become-animal' or simply imitates one (Cull 2012: 195). While much has been written about these earlier works, little critical attention has been given to Coates's more recent performances on the subject of extinction. This body of work tackles the disappearance of wildlife and habitats in ways that are often absurd and comic. But is the ecological threat of extinction really a laughing matter? The use of humour might initially seem incongruous and insensitive as a way of dealing with this serious subject. Yet Coates cultivates this characteristic of his ecologically orientated performances in sincere and strategic ways.

The theorist Timothy Morton's work is particularly useful in relation to Coates's extinction-related performances, since he affords a central role to laughter in ecological awareness and identifies different kinds, which might be shameful or guilty, for instance (2016: 132–3). Significantly Morton describes one level of ecological awareness where laughter can be found as the ridiculous, positioning it as 'a realm of satire and sarcasm' where one might 'encounter the art of the absurd' (144). It is also where gallows humour lurks, 'poised between laughter and despair' (ibid.). This ecological framing of humour provides a productive context for exploring Coates's recent work about extinction, which deploys satire, parody and dark humour to tackle this serious subject.

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### **Satirizing species loss**

In the film Human Report (2008), Marcus Coates wanders around the Galápagos island town of Puerto Ayora dressed as a blue-footed booby (fig. 1). Wearing a comical costume crafted from cardboard, Coates performs a satirical take on wildlife film by reporting on the human islanders from the imagined perspective of this native marine bird. The film was screened on the local Galápagos news and was subsequently presented as a video installation in international exhibitions. It was produced as part of the Gulbenkian Galápagos Artists' Residency Programme (2007–11), which aimed to raise public awareness of the social and conservation issues facing the wildlife and communities on the islands via a touring exhibition (Arends and Ede 2012). The show drew attention to the complex entanglements of wildlife and humans on Galápagos, including scientists, tourists and economic migrants drawn from mainland Ecuador to profit from the growing tourism market (Ede 2012: 10). At once humorous and poignant, Coates used his comic bird persona to explore and critique this human inhabitation and visitation of Galápagos, which poses various threats to the unique fauna and ecologies across the archipelago and also results in a precarious existence for the islands' human residents.

[[figure1]]

Tackling these serious issues while comically dressed as a bird, the artist looked somewhat ridiculous. Indeed, the humour derived from this performance depended on this very act, since according to the philosopher Simon Critchley the comic arises through the 'inversion of the human and the animal', or 'the sudden and incongruous humanity of the animal' (2002: 31). In this way Human Report is the very embodiment of the comic, playing with this transgression in both directions simultaneously—Coates being at once a man performing as a booby reporting as a human would from the booby's perspective. In fact, Coates performed as a booby in more than one sense.

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The film opens with a reflection on the bird's name by the female Spanish narration: 'Our name is "Booby", which in Spanish means "stupid". In English it means a woman's breast: You are calling me a stupid tit' (Human Report 2008). Here a British slang term for 'idiot' is used to refer to Coates in this performance. The artist proffers a knowing acceptance of the absurdity of his position in this work, in which he walks through the island town comically dressed as this iconic bird, critically observing the impact of tourism on Galápagos at the same time as being a visitor himself. The blue-footed booby may not yet be extinct or endangered, but Coates's choice to impersonate this bird to raise awareness about the problems plaguing the islands is significant—he acts the 'booby' and the work functions as a one-liner. As the art historian Shepherd Steiner observed, '[t]hough his intention is to give a straight reporting on the plight of man on these fragile islands, his cardboard outfit indelibly marks the performance as literally speaking from the perspective of a boob or fool' (2016: 11).

Throughout the film Coates's booby observes various inequalities between tourists and residents on the islands. The booby's report also highlights the detrimental effects that this human inhabitation has had on local wildlife, such as the ecological impact of the introduction of invasive species, through a shot of an islander cradling a pet cat. The booby also recognizes the unsuitability of the islands' resources for human dwelling due to the lack of fresh water, saying to islanders:

You are parasites. ... But what I don't understand is why you colonised these islands which lack both water and supplies of food. Your survival isn't assured because you find it hard to adapt to local conditions. It's a precarious kind of existence. In any case, don't worry, you are not in danger. I've seen many more like you in other places. If you all die, it

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will be OK. More humans will come and start a new breeding colony. (Human Report 2008).

These words present a satirical twist on typical narratives of species loss by placing humans in the position of vulnerability. Coates recognizes the precarious situation of the islands' inhabitants, many of whom arrived on Galápagos as a result of the opportunities afforded by eco-tourism. Furthermore, he is critical about the unsustainability of this situation and its wider ecological impact.

The artist's deployment of humour in this work is strategic, combining satire and a comic zoomorphism to critique the complexities that human life on the islands brings in a way that is somewhat softened by being uttered by such a comic, approachable protagonist—the artist performing as a bird (Coates cited in Foulds 2012: para. 4 of 10). As a result, Coates tackles these sensitive issues in good humour to engage rather than ostracize those implicated in his critique when screening Human Report on the local TV news. In addition, when presented in Liverpool, Edinburgh and Lisbon as part of the Galápagos (2012–13) touring exhibition, the work harboured the possibility of dissuading others from visiting these fragile isles, lest they contribute to the issues that perpetuate their plight (Arends 2012: 46–7). In this way Coates's comic zoomorphism becomes as political and ecological as it is eccentric.

### **Pathos, parody and public apology**

In 2017 Marcus Coates worked with a group of residents and visitors on Fogo Island, Newfoundland, Canada, to draft an apology to the Great Auk. This bird became extinct in the middle of the nineteenth century after being over-exploited by humans for food, fat and feathers. At the time, knowledge of dwindling numbers only added to the species plight. The bodies and eggs of

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the last remaining birds were collected for science and in 1844 the last pair of Great Auks were clubbed to death and sent to a museum in Belgium to be preserved for posterity (Lorimer 2014: 200). Coates's work takes the form of a film, which shows the artist chairing a committee of local residents and visitors who are assembled like a quasi-governmental entity in a cabin to debate the text of the apology. They thoughtfully discuss the main points of the draft, making adjustments to the wording until they are ready to take it to the mayor of the island to be ratified. The film cuts between this scene and another where Coates sits with the mayor, who is casually chewing gum while carefully reading through the text and making amends until he is happy to deliver it in public. The pair are sat in front of a backdrop of a British and Canadian flag stowed away in the left-hand side of the shot and a photographic portrait of the queen, resulting in a setting that makes one wonder whether it is authentic or artificially staged to add a degree of legitimacy to this unconventional process (fig. 2). The film ends with the mayor, dressed casually in shorts, T-shirt and Fogo Island baseball cap, reading the apology through a megaphone out towards the sea from a jetty on the shoreline (fig. 3).

[{figure2}]

The process performed through this film recalls the act of reparation and public apologies, which are usually made on behalf of nations for past ills. Such apologies principally comprise acknowledgement of wrongdoing, admission of responsibility and result in an attempt to compensate for the damage done. Indeed, Coates's Apology to the Great Auk (2017) responds to each of these three requirements. First, it opens with an acknowledgement of wrongdoing: 'On behalf of all those present on Fogo Island today, our ancestors and anyone who's actions contributed to your demise and ultimate extinction, we apologize.' Second, it continues with an admission of responsibility: 'We apologize for the actions of those who were directly responsible for killing you in numbers that exceeded the need for personal

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survival and whose actions were motivated by financial profit or gain.' Third, it attempts to compensate for the damage done with:

We promise you, the Great Auks, that we will do everything in our power to honour your once thriving existence here. We promise to do all we can to protect your kin, the other auks, birds and animals that we share our territories with, to maintain the diversity of conditions necessary for their survival. (Apology to the Great Auk 2017).

One of the aims of public acts of apology is to ameliorate social interactions between victims and perpetrators, in this case between humans and the Great Auks. Of course, this bird is long extinct, but this promise is extended to the Great Auk's creaturely kin in the final lines of the apology, which states: 'We will use the lessons of your extinction to educate our young and to promote respect for other species. We will do everything in our power to prevent the future extinctions of others' (Apology to the Great Auk 2017). Here the Great Auk in this work is invested with what the environmental geographer Jamie Lorimer refers to as 'governmental force', these birds becoming what he describes as 'aesthetic icons of an apocalyptic future deployed for shaping citizens for the avoidance of future extinctions' (2014: 204). On these terms, Coates's carefully orchestrated enactment of a public apology to the Great Auk has the capacity to prompt viewers to reflect on anthropogenic extinctions and strive to prevent this from happening again. It also performs an act of justice on behalf of the Great Auk.

There is a sincerity and earnestness about Coates's attempt at this reparative act. One line of the apology recognizes that the world is impoverished without the Great Auk, concluding: 'Your absence is an irreparable loss which we will continue to mourn.' It is this mourning and grieving for an extinct species, which on the environmental humanities scholar Thom Van Dooren's (2016) terms offers the possibility for responding to wildlife with empathy, respect and

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a renewed sense of responsibility. Van Dooren quotes the author Thomas Attig, who writes:

As we grieve, we appropriate new understandings of the world and ourselves within it. We also become different in the light of the loss as we assume a new orientation to the world. As we relearn, we adjust emotional and other psychological responses and postures. We transform habits, motivations, and behaviours. (Attig cited in Van Dooren 2016: 139)

Mourning and grief as they are understood here have political and ethical potential, since they can provoke a change in behaviour and enable us to learn from experiences of loss. In relation to the loss of species, Van Dooren compellingly argues that processes of grieving and mourning have the capacity to mobilize change, since they involve 'transformation to accommodate a changed reality', offering the possibility for positively reconfiguring our relationships with wildlife (2016: 139). Coates's invocation of mourning therefore holds out strategic promise, providing an opportunity for inducing a sense of responsibility in the face of species loss.

Yet at the same time that Coates evokes sorrow and compassion for the loss of this species, there is also something parodic and bathetic about the performance documented in this film. For instance, there is the mayor who is instructed to deliver the apology to the extinct birds in a language they could never understand in front of just a handful of casual bystanders. Furthermore, there is the fact he does this while dressed unceremoniously in shorts and a T-shirt, undercutting the formality usually accorded to the delivery of public apologies and simultaneously puncturing the sombre subject of the performance. Then there is the setting of the artist's meeting with the mayor, which seems to have been carefully staged with obvious symbols of nation

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(flags), state (the portrait of the queen) and justice (a gavel sits next to the mayor) as if to parody the sites where these official acts ordinarily take place. As a result, Apology to the Great Auk shuttles between pathos and bathos, a quality Mark Wallinger (2005) also observed in Coates's earlier performances, and humour emerges alongside the sincere agenda behind this work.

[{figure3}]


As ridiculous and anthropocentric that apologizing for species loss like this might appear, Coates's performance offers promise for prompting viewers to safeguard the future of other species by invoking mourning and harnessing the 'governmental force' of the charismatic Great Auk. Yet it also performed a central role in bringing a local community together to address extinction. The work created the kind of ecological collectivity where, in Timothy Morton's terms, reflection and meditation become central to 'enacting or experiencing an intrinsic interconnectedness', to result in nonhumans being treated with tenderness (2010: 127–8). As such, through this performance Coates cultivated a space for thoughtfully and collectively reflecting on species loss in the past as well as the future.

### **Deploying dark humour**

The Last of Its Kind (2017) was another work Coates made on Fogo Island, in which he plays the part of the last human on Earth. Standing naked behind a dry-stone wall and looking out towards the sea, the artist shouts out a list of human achievements, which range from feminism to the invention of the ballpoint pen, in a desperate and pathetic bid to ward off humanity's extinction (fig. 4). As the performance progresses, Coates becomes increasingly frantic and frustrated as his ranting and raving receives no response from the audience of indifferent icebergs. The act is as absurd as it is ridiculous, yet the performance thoughtfully refuses to place humans outside of the plights facing other species. Coates's list of human achievements is carefully



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compiled to draw attention to the fact that they are not all things to be celebrated or congratulated. Petrol, plastic and even the atomic bomb were presumably selected to draw ironic attention to how humans have been responsible for bringing about the destruction of both themselves and their own environment. Despite its futility, Coates's performance retains its sense of urgency and when he arrives at the end of his list, he starts reciting it again. 

The difficulty of conceptualizing and contemplating something the scale and magnitude of humanity's extinction is enhanced by the visual cues offered by Coates, which recall the sublime landscapes widely associated with paintings by the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). Coates's position in the frame is reminiscent of Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog (1817) and the iceberg peppered seascape evokes The Sea of Ice (1823–4), in which icebergs and shards of broken ice are shown to have caused a shipwreck. The ship is shown at the very edge of this painting, almost incidentally, as if to indicate the sheer indifference of this Arctic wilderness to human life and the insignificance of humanity in the face of it. Set against a backdrop of a vast and unpopulated seascape, Coates's performance conjures a similar mood. The futility of this last man's endeavours for salvation in the face of the vast and unsympathetic natural world evoke a contemporary form of the sublime, which is premised on the notion that humanity's place on this planet is in no way guaranteed. It seems worth noting that Friedrich's icy seascape, which Coates appears to pay homage to, is also known as The Wreck of Hope, adding further futility to Coates's optimistic endeavour of staving off humankind's extinction. The critic Gabriel Coxhead suggested that Coates's allusions to the 'overfamiliar Romantic trope of sublime, indifferent nature' in this work are not as effective as in other works where the artist makes us reconsider these 'received ideas of the natural world' instead (2018: para. 3 of 4). However, Coates does invite a re-evaluation of these received ideas by presenting a version of the sublime premised on humanity as part of,

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rather than separate from, the natural world and does so to great effect: like other animals living in these ecologically troubled times, humankind is not immune from the threat of future extinction.

The sublime overtones of Coates's performance could work against the artist's apparent attempts to mobilize a change in behaviour, fostering a paralysing resignation instead (Morley 2010: 19). However, Coates rebelliously counters the immobilizing fear and dread typically associated with the sublime through his absurd performance. Instead, he makes the subject of one's own mortality and the end of humankind cause for amusement, evoking the sort of gallows humour found in Morton's realm of the ridiculous (Morton 2016: 144). In his well-known and often cited work, Freud claimed that humour erupts as a result of an affective release arising when a negative or distressing affect has been avoided (1960 [1905]: 228). Through his absurd performance, Coates saves viewers the terror of their own mortality and the fear of humankind's finitude, resulting in a cathartic release of humour in which viewers laugh off their own extinction. Yet this deflection is a strategic tool that can also draw closer attention to the very affect that has been avoided. As Simon Critchley points out in relation to Freud's 1927 article Humour, if humour is an economy of affect, it also points to what the source of that affect is (Critchley 1999: 120). Accordingly, Coates's performative dark humour emphasizes the fear and, importantly, the vulnerability of humankind when faced with their own extinction, offering strategic possibilities for responding to species loss.

Scholars working in the field of extinction studies have argued that engaging with species loss might generate a renewed sense of responsibility towards earthly life and evoke empathy by drawing attention to the vulnerability we share with other animals on an increasingly fragile planet (Rose et al. 2017). Death is indeed universal to all living beings and an awareness of the

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precarious nature of mortality can therefore provoke not only empathy, but also kinship. By placing humans in the same precarious position as many other species, Coates enacts an ecological solidarity with earthbound others. The artist performs in a way that on Peta Tait's terms, 'emphasize[s] emotional attachment to the non-human in support of the politics of survival' at a time marked by mass extinction (2018: 194).

### **A playful seriousness**

Humour plays a serious role in Coates's work on extinction. Indeed, we might think of these performances as strategically employing a 'playful seriousness', something Timothy Morton observed to be somewhat necessary when trying to foster an expanded sense of care towards other life forms (2018: 186). Like Morton, the scholar and comedian Kate Fox suggested that humour and seriousness need not be mutually exclusive categories and can harbour transformative potential when entwined (2018: 96). As Simon Critchley observed, the strategic potential of humour lies in the fact that 'laughter lets us see the folly of the world in order to imagine a better world in its place, and to change the situation in which we find ourselves' (2002: 17). Coates's works harness these transformative possibilities of humour to induce a desire to care and even act in the face of disappearing wildlife and habitats. In this way the artist performs a political act that on Morton's terms 'includes what appears least political—laughter, the playful, even the silly' (2016: 113).

While extinction is certainly no laughing matter for this artist, Coates's humorous performances inhabit the ridiculous layer of ecological awareness, wielding satire, absurdity and gallows humour as tools to raise awareness of extinction and even incite a desire to act in the face of it. As such, this body of work recalls Nicole Seymour's 'bad environmentalism', where irony, humour and irreverence are deployed as alternatives to the more serious and sombre

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affects usually linked to environmentalism to both critically engage with ecological concerns, as well as to critique conventional approaches to environmental art and activism (2018: 4, 6). While humour has its inevitable limits in this context, this approach radically expands the affective registers that might be experimentally probed to represent species loss and engage viewers with difficult and pressing issues like extinction. For Coates, performance provides a space to playfully try these out.

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### **Captions**

Figure 1. Marcus Coates, Human Report, 2008. Photography by Elke Hartmann, courtesy of Kate MacGarry and Workplace Gallery.

Figure 2. Marcus Coates, Apology to the Great Auk, 2017. Photography by Darryn Doull, courtesy of Kate MacGarry and Workplace Gallery.

Figure 3. Marcus Coates, Apology to the Great Auk, 2017. Photography by Darryn Doull, courtesy of Kate MacGarry and Workplace Gallery.

Figure 4. Marcus Coates, The Last of Its Kind, 2017 (film still). Digital video, 15:48 mins. Produced in association with the Museum of the Flat Earth, Fogo Island, Canada. Courtesy of Kate MacGarry and Workplace Gallery.